

6. Marshall is a complicated character. At times, he is kind and protective; other times, he is a violent monster. What is the secret that Marshall is forced to keep? Is he to blame for what happened to Sally? Why do you think Marshall was loyal to Rankin, who was a conspirator with Mr. Waters?

7. "I grew convinced that if she saw me, she would become well again" (page 188). Why does Lavinia feel that her presence would help Miss Martha? Describe their relationship. If Lavinia is nurtured by Mama and Belle, why does she need Miss Martha's attention? Is the relationship one-sided, or does Miss Martha care for Lavinia in return?

8. "Fortunately, making myself amenable was not foreign to me, as I had lived this way for much of my life" (page 233). Do you think this attribute of Lavinia saves or endangers her life? Give examples for both.

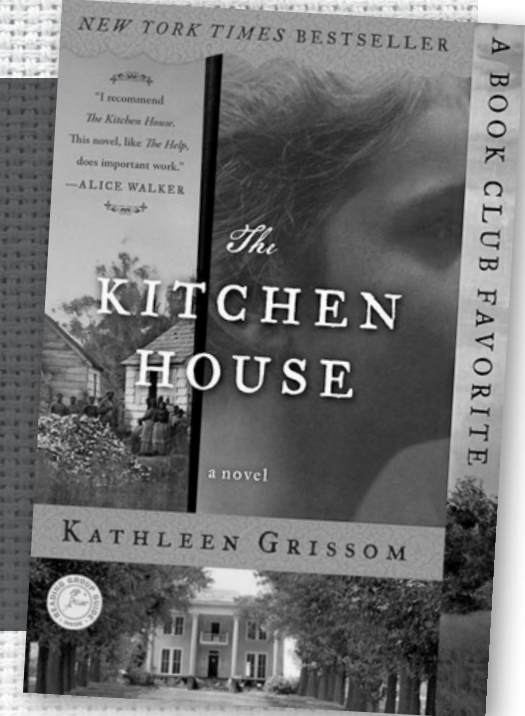
9. Describe the relationship between Ben's wife, Lucy, and Belle. How does it evolve throughout the novel? Is it difficult for you to understand their friendship? Why or why not?

10. "I was as enslaved as all the others" (page 300). Do you think this statement by Lavinia is fair? Is her position equivalent to those of the slaves? What freedom does she have that the slaves do not? What burdens does her race put upon her?

Discussion Questions

"Grissom's unsentimental debut twists the conventions of the antebellum novel just enough to give readers an involving new perspective"
— *Publisher's Weekly*

Book Club in a Bag



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Born **Kathleen Doepker**, I was privileged as a child to be raised in Annaheim, Saskatchewan, a hamlet on the plains of Canada. Although we lived in a small, tightly knit Roman Catholic community, I was fortunate to have parents who were open to other religions and cultures. Since television was not a luxury our household could afford, books were the windows that expanded my world.

Throughout my high school years Simon Lizée, a poet of merit, was our principal. He taught us literature and it was he who encouraged me to write.

Upon graduating from high school, as I saw it then, I had four choices. I could marry (no),

become a secretary (no), become a teacher

(no) become a nurse (yes). After I graduated from nursing school, I left for Montreal and there worked on staff at the Royal Vic Hospital. Eventually I married and came down to the United States. Throughout, I read voraciously and I wrote, often sending my work back to Mr. Lizée in Saskatchewan, who took the time to continue to instruct me.

It wasn't until after I gave birth to my daughter, Erin, that I finally worked up enough courage to submit a short story to Myrna Blyth, who, I believe at that time was an editor at Family Circle. She sent back a lovely rejection note, telling me that this story was not one that she could use, but could I send others. I took that note to mean that she did not like my writing, but was being kind, and I foolishly submitted nothing further.

In time, I divorced and remarried, relocated to Manhattan, and there worked as an Ad Executive for a graphics company. I did not stop reading, nor writing, and over the next years took various classes in creative writing. After four years in the city, we decided to try life on a small farm in New Jersey.

When our collection of animals grew to include twenty-five Cashmere goats, two horses, three dogs, and two cats, we knew that it was time to relocate to a larger farm in rural Virginia. There we found twenty-seven acres and a large brick house, circa 1830, that once served as a stagecoach stop.

Book Summary

Orphaned while onboard ship from Ireland, seven-year-old Lavinia arrives on the steps of a tobacco plantation where she is to live and work with the slaves of the kitchen house. Under the care of Belle, the master's illegitimate daughter, Lavinia becomes deeply bonded to her adopted family, though she is set apart from them by her white skin.

Eventually, Lavinia is accepted into the world of the big house, where the master is absent and the mistress battles opium addiction. Lavinia finds herself perilously straddling two very different worlds. When she is forced to make a choice, loyalties are brought into question, dangerous truths are laid bare, and lives are put at risk.

The Kitchen House is a tragic story of page-turning suspense, exploring the meaning of family, where love and loyalty prevail.

Discussion Questions

1. Why do you think the author chose to tell the story through two narrators? How are Lavinia's observations and judgments different from Belle's? Does this story belong to one more than the other? If you could choose another character to narrate the novel, who would it be?

2. One of the novel's themes is history repeating itself. Another theme is isolation. Select scenes from *The Kitchen House* that depict each theme and discuss. Are there scenes in which the two themes intersect?

3. "Mae knows that her eldest daughter consorts with my husband. . . Almost from the beginning, I suspected their secrets" (page 107). Why does the captain keep Belle's true identity a secret from his wife and children? Do you think the truth would have been a relief to his family or torn them further apart? At what point does keeping this secret turn tragic?

4. Discuss the significance of birds and bird nests in the novel. What or who do they symbolize? What other symbols support the novel?

4. "When I saw their hunger I was struck with a deep familiarity and turned away, my mind anxious to keep at bay memories it was not yet ready to recall" (page 24). Consider Lavinia's history. Do you think the captain saved her life by bringing her to America as an indentured servant? Or do you think it was a fate worse than the one she would have faced in Ireland? Discuss the difference between slavery and indentured servitude.
